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SPECIAL

THE DESIGN PROCESS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION FACILITY PLANNING

by

Alan Abeson

Introduction

The intent of this paper is to examine an approach to the planning of special education facilities to result in the design of physical facilities which permit the effective implementation of special education programs.

A few of the major factors should be discussed which can operate to improve not only the quality of the planning, but ultimately the effectiveness of the educational program that occurs in the completed building.

Design Process

One important phrase in planning special educational facilities is "design process." This phrase is used because it implies that the derivation of a design for a facility is not merely a matter of having an architect or designer produce predetermined designs of classrooms. Rather, the term implies that the derivation of a design occurs through a lengthy data gathering and assessing process that is centered upon an analysis of the behaviors and activities that will occur in the new environment. The first step in data gathering is precisely determining your philosophy as it applies to the education of the particular children of concern. Dr. J.G. Benedict expresses this concept with sufficient importance when he suggested in a personal communication that "the philosophy and the carriers of the philosophy be on hand well before new structures are constructed or designed."

In the past, educators have been approaching the design process when they have engaged in the preparation of the educational specifications. Particular attention is devoted to listing the furnishings and equipment that are needed. The problem, however, is that the specifications are rarely prepared with sufficient precision or completeness to be of great use to the architect. This is particularly true in describing many of the seemingly unimportant events which occur daily. Children take drinks, walk to the blackboard, stand at their seats. These things are unimportant perhaps but nevertheless of concern, for the architect may see implications for design which will facilitate the realization of many such activities. Of course, such an approach by the architect requires his appreciation of the positive effects which can be transmitted or reinforced by the environment. Consider an example: most classrooms and schools are designed to admit children directly into the classrooms from the hall or outdoors. Boots, coats, lunches, etc. are deposited in the main classroom and "arrival behavior" occurs there as well. Thus, some time must be taken by the teacher to stop that behavior and prepare the children for the learning activities of the day. What if an anteroom, separated by some type of barrier from the learning space were available and the children entered the learning area knowing that "now it is time to learn and we start by coming into this space." Would it make a difference in their mood or behavior? This is not certain, but that mood and

attitude can be influenced by environment is known. Simply think of a "romantic dinner" and what that brings to your mind in terms of the environment.

Problems in Implementation of the Design Process

This brief discussion then leads to the specific problems likely to be faced in the implementation of the design process. Few educators have the experience to completely assess the capabilities of the environment and few architects can completely grasp the functioning of the educational process. The obvious need is to bridge this gap by bringing the designer and educator together for the exchange of meaningful information. In fact, what is required is the much maligned "interdisciplinary" effort. Included in this effort must be not only the educator, but also the full complement of ancillary and support personnel that assist the classroom teacher. As you well know, in special education this ideally involves an army of specialists from the speech therapist to the rehabilitation counselor, including classroom aides and dietary staff.

Inherent in the creation of a multidisciplinary effort in this arena are three formidable obstacles. The first of these is overcoming the barriers to communication that may exist between the designer architect and the educator. Designers frequently admit that they prefer graphic to verbal expression. Because educators live their entire lives using verbal expression, an immediate problem is evident. The extent of this incompat bility may extend from uses of the words "program" to "research." Student and Stea (1966) express the predicament of the designer most graphically: "Finally, he (the designer) must make highly complex design decisions with linguistic (conceptual) tools which are both inappropriate and clumsy (p. 130)." Studer (1965), speaking about the inability of the designer to assimilate the results of behavioral research into design criteria, issues a case for alterations of the language of the designer which permits the incorporation of other information.

While it may appear that what has been said thus far places the burden of fault upon the architect, this is not intended. After all, educators have similarly been successful at creating a highly specialized vocabulary which not only locks out other "specialists" but also causes internal confusion. The terms team teaching, grouping, and experience unit teaching are but a few examples. By conveying the demands of the environment in educational terms to the architect, the educator will be forced to clarify each concept demand to permit design decisions to be most accurately made. The educator can no longer say to an architect, "we need a 24 classroom school with the usual facilities," nor can he and his staff prepare a set of educational specifications for delivery to an absentee architect at a later date.

Another question that must be raised at the juncture is how much time the architect can economically afford to spend with the planning of your facility. Since his time must be limited, carefully drawn plans should precede the arrival of the architect to insure that his maximum contribution is obtained. Perhaps the architect should meet initially with the educational staff or committee that will develop the specifications to indicate some of the information he requires. The committee should, upon completing the specifications, interpret them for the architect. Also, the architect should spend time in the schools seeing what occurs, what the children are like, the multiple uses of space, etc. Perhaps the architect and representatives of the committee could interview staff to obtain individual information not contained in the summery educational specifications. Certainly, an effective working relationship between the architect and educational staff will prove valuable

later when reaction to the preliminary sketches are needed. Therefore, the educational agents have a responsibility to plan the use of the architect's time with them so that the greatest amount of workable data can be generated for consideration in the preparation of the preliminary sketches.

The third problem, in addition to communication and economy of effort, is that of discovering with the architect what it is that you don't know. Consider the plight of the small community that is in the midst of planning a new building and wishes to include, as an integral portion of it, an instructional materials center. As the time comes to derive specific plans, it is up to the educator and architect either apart or in tandem to seek the aid of information and/or specialists.

While facilitating the design process through interdisciplinary planning is beset by three distinct major problems, the three are closely interrelated. To create communication, the feeling must be that both educators and architects have a contribution which can only be made effectively through interaction. The attempt to achieve interaction results in a clarification of vocabulary objectives and areas of competency. This clarification process is furthered by joint planning by the architect and educator to insure that the former is exposed with guidance to the maximum opportunities for the collection of information to be absorbed prior to the production of the design.

Conclusion

Consideration of two final points is necessary in conclusion. First, beware of accepting popularized concepts as requirements for your buildings. An example of this occurance is that many programs submitted to architects include a request for the provision of "maximum flexibility." The question is, if it is needed where should it occur, and how? Many classrooms now are constructed with the capability for connecting through the removal of a variety of types of temporary walls. However, we asked many of the teachers in these rooms how often they exercised the potential and the majority indicated rarely or never. Thus, another point has been scored for engaging in the careful preparation of individual programs.

Asking the teachers about the use of their rooms is a simple form of evaluating the environment. Thus, you should be encouraged to engage in as complete an evaluation as possible of your existing and new facilities. A most effective means of accomplishing this objective is to compare the teacher teacher's reactions of the environment to the originally stated objectives in the program given to the architect. However, once the evaluation is completed, the results must not be filed away, but should be incorporated in the program for the next facility.

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ABSTRACT

GARLAND JUNIOR COLLEGE'S PROGRAM ON THE EXCEPTIONAL CHILD

by

Vera C. Weisz

This paper describes the philosophy of the Garland Junior College Child Study Department, and how it is implemented in the training of teacher assistants and teacher aides.

The students are prepared to work with children from two through six years of age, and are exposed to a core of human development courses and supervised practicum experiences that will enable them to assist with children in a variety of settings.

Assistant Teachers

Between 1963 and 1967, 20 of the Garland graduates transferred to college programs in the field of special education, and 20 worked with disadvantaged children. The training allows the students to become familiar with some of the problems and potentials of the exceptional and disadvantaged child during their training and become aware of the many approaches to teaching these children.

The Child Study majors are screened prior to the second year by the Chairman of the Department. Their personal qualities and potential to work with young children are reviewed. Field work placement with exceptional children is postponed to the second semester, so that during the first semester the student obtains a basic experience with normal children. An Associate of Science degree is awarded to the graduate.

Some of the special needs of the exceptional and disadvantaged child and the methods and compensatory practices in working with these children are described.

The Garland program offers a variety of enrichment experiences such as films, guest speakers, and observations in clinics, hospitals, day care centers and guidance centers to give the student deeper understanding of the exceptional child.

Close field work supervision and individual counseling is a strong feature of both the teacher assistant and the teacher aide programs.

Teacher Aides

The three short term training programs for teacher aides followed the prototype of the two year assistant program. Sixty percent of the candidates were from target poverty areas and ranged from 16 to 23 years of age in two programs, and 23 to 52 years of age in another, in contrast to the regular Garland student. These were six to eight week in residence programs with four credits, which included much group interaction, cultural trips, required remedial reading, role playing and other methods of intensifying the learning

experience.

The employment of these graduates was a major problem, since the local school system was not ready to employ aides. Seven of these girls received scholarships to Garland Junior College and 13 worked in day care centers and Head Start programs.